

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”
³⁷ Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’
³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰
All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”
⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ⁴² “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”
“The son of David,” they replied.
⁴³ He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says,
⁴⁴ “The Lord said to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.” ’
⁴⁵ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶ No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:34-46)

What is Perfect Love?

Last summer, we took our kids to Michigan’s Adventure, the water park in Muskegon. That park has all these cool waterslides and tunnels. My kids loved it. A couple of days ago, my secretary and I engaged in a debate about Sweetest Day. My wife and I contend that it’s not a real holiday. It’s just an excuse to sell greeting cards and candy. But my secretary thinks that on that day – today – we husbands should say a special “I love you” to our wives. One day last week, I had a dream about a friend that I knew a long time ago. We were really close once and it wouldn’t be too much to say that I loved that friend – if you understand that word correctly. That’s what I’m driving at this morning. Love for water parks, even love for friends is different from the love that I have for my wife. The word of God we have before us this morning is all about love. But not love like any I’ve mentioned today. It’s about love for God and love from God. What kind of love is that? To put it another way, **what is perfect love?**

I.

Matthew, the writer of our text this morning, begins with love *for* God. **What is perfect love for God?** Just three days before he died, Jesus answered that question. Two days earlier, he had entered Jerusalem with the crowds waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” His enemies didn’t like that, so they lined up to try to take him down a notch. They posed difficult questions, trying to make him look bad in front of the crowds. And after Jesus silenced the Sadducees, their chief rivals, the Pharisees, took their turn. They asked, **“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”**

The Jews were very concerned with the law of Moses. They had made a careful count and they reckoned that there were 613 laws in the first five books of the Bible. So it was natural for them to ask which was the greatest. Jesus gave the only answer possible: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”** This command is the heart of living as a child of God. Perfect love for God sets all our heart on him. It dedicates all our soul and all our mind to the Lord. Practically speaking what does that mean? It means that we come and we hear God’s word because it’s important to us. We don’t do it just out of habit or because our parents drag us out of bed on Sunday morning. We do it because we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. It means that we support his work with our offerings and our time. It means that we take seriously the need to grow in our faith and knowledge of him. It means that we put God first in our lives.

That means that God’s word governs all aspects of our lives. God is the one who commands us to love and honor our parents. God is the one who commands us to honor and be faithful to our spouses. God commands us not to murder, not to steal, not to lie, not to covet. If God comes first in my life, then I’m going to obey him in my dealings with the people around me. I cannot claim to love God but treat other people like garbage.

That's why Jesus added the second point. The Pharisees recognized that God came first. But they didn't make the connection to our treatment of the people around us. Jesus condemned them because they evicted poor widows from their homes and then made a great show of praying and bringing offerings to God. To keep them and us from compartmentalizing our love for God and our love for each other, Jesus said, "**And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'**" .

What does that mean? In simple terms, it means that I don't get to put myself first. We as a society have accepted the principle that sometimes we need to take care of ourselves first. You never read that in Scripture. God calls us to sacrifice for each other. God calls us to always put the person next to us on at least the same level as we put ourselves. And think how different troubled marriages would be if we actually practiced that. Think how different life would be if selfishness were eliminated. I think about that every time I pick somebody else's trash up off my lawn. The heart and soul of the sin is selfishness.

But God doesn't want me just to shake my head at other people and their selfishness. God wants me to see my own. God wants me to recognize that I was born a sinner. I'm selfish and greedy and prideful by nature. Every time I put what I want ahead of what my wife needs or ahead of what would be best for my children, I sin against God who called me to love my neighbor as myself. I fail to love the Lord with all my heart and soul and mind and strength.

The kind of love that God wants us to have chooses to do whatever needs to be done for someone else. It spares no sacrifice and avoids no loss or hurt to serve him by serving the people around us. Can any of us claim that we live up to that standard? No honest heart can. We're talking about more than just being generally nice people. We're talking about more than just being a good parent or a good spouse. We're talking about perfect love for God, shown in our constant dedication to him and his word and in perfect, unflinching service to the people around us. When you apply that standard of perfection, you cannot help but see how far short we all fall. We're sinners. And we sin against God in what we think and feel about others and about him every day of our lives. We sin against God in what we do and in what we say constantly. We can't help but sin. We deserve nothing but death and hell forever.

Love always does what's best for the person that we love. That's true for God, too. So in love, God sent his Son to love in our place. Jesus loved God with all his heart and soul and strength and mind. He did it every second of his life without fail and without reservation. Jesus always loved the people around him at least as much as he loved himself. Jesus fulfilled God's law in our place. And God gives us credit for what Jesus has done. Jesus loved us so much that he laid down his life to pay for our sin and all our failures to love. Jesus died for all the times our heart wasn't dedicated to coming and hearing his word. He died for the times we were selfish and self-involved, for all the times we sinned against him by sinning against our spouses or our children or strangers at the mall. He died and paid for it all. When he rose, God declared that we are free from death and hell. God declared that for Jesus' sake he will consider our love perfect, even though you and I can never do that. So we will live with him in joy forever.

II.

Jesus knew what effect talking about love would have: guilt. Now wait a minute. How can I ever say that about something like love? Well, I'm sure you felt it just a minute ago. When I was talking about love for God and love for each other, did you maybe want to hang your head a little? Did you maybe exchange an ashamed look with your spouse? That's guilt. It's the reason why Jesus turned the conversation away from us and towards him. He wanted to talk about a different kind of love: God's love for us. My friends, **What is perfect love from God?**

We like to believe that we do a good enough job of loving our families, that God should be happy with our church attendance and our offerings, that even if we do sometimes put other things ahead of him, God should be satisfied with our efforts. The sinner in our hearts hates hearing that he's not. That's why "feel good" messages are so popular today. Sinners don't like being told they're sinners.

Jesus knew that. He knew that when he forces sinners to examine their own hearts, the guilt that he provokes is terrible. So he turned the conversation away from the law to the gospel. That's why he asked the Pharisees about the Christ. Ever since the Garden of Eden, God had been promising to send a Savior for his people, the Messiah or the Christ. Jesus asked, "**What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?**" They gave Jesus the answer Jesus expected: David's son. The Old Testament clearly taught that the coming Messiah would be a descendant of King David. And Jesus was.

But then he asked the follow-up question: **“How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’?”** In Jewish society, fathers always outranked their sons. Ancestors always outranked their descendants. King David should always be his descendant’s lord, not his servant. Jesus quoted Psalm 110, **“The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”** In Hebrew in Psalm 110 “The Lord” is the very name of God – Jehovah if you like. “My Lord” is David speaking of Jesus. The Father tells Jesus to sit at his right hand after his ascension. And Jesus’ point to the Pharisees was that King David, who saw all this a thousand years before it happened, called his descendant Jesus “my Lord.” Why?

The Pharisees could give no answer. Can you? There is an answer. Jesus really is the son of David. He was and is a real human being. Jesus had a body and soul, a mind and heart, just like we do. But Jesus was also the Son of God. He was and is true God in every respect. King David had to call God the Son “Lord” even though Jesus was his descendant. Why does that matter? It matters because many false Christs will arise. Any conception of Jesus that robs him of his humanity or his godhood is a false Christ. To be saved, you must trust in the real Jesus, the Jesus who is God and man. Now, you don’t have to understand how it worked or even how it was possible. I don’t understand that. But you do need to recognize that it’s true.

Jesus was a true human being because we are. Jesus came to love as God commands us to. For that to count for us human beings, a real, true human being had to love God with all his body, soul, mind and strength. A real human being had to love God by loving the people around him. Jesus fulfilled that. And a real human being had to die. A real human being had to suffer hell and all the sorrow that sin inflicts on us here. Jesus fit the bill for that, too.

But one man, even one perfect man, could not save all the billions of people who’ve ever lived. It took the blood and the suffering and the death of God to pay for all human sin. It took the love and dedication and perfection of God to earn life for all people. And my friends, God’s love is perfect, so he gave us exactly that. He gave us himself. God the Son came down here and stood in our place. God the Son made himself a real man in the womb of the Virgin Mary so that you and I truly are bought and paid for and forgiven. That is perfect love *from* God.

There are at least four different kinds of love, each of which has a different name in Greek. There’s the love that comes from being familiar with things. The love that builds up when you spend years with people and you know them. There’s the love that comes from physical attraction, a love for things that complement us, as women complement men. There’s the love that goes out to people who are like us – the love of friendship and companionship. All of these loves are gifts from God. But they are all different from the love we’re talking about this morning. All of them are conditional – you only feel them if someone fulfills the condition. They have to be familiar and comfortable or likeminded or attractive.

The fourth kind of love is different. That love is unconditional. It loves no matter what. That is the love God has for us in Christ. We deserved nothing but he gave us his very Son. He won eternal life for us and he sends joy and even sorrow according to what we need to stay on the road to heaven. That love is the love he calls us to reflect. A love that chooses to love God and hear his word. A love that chooses to love the people around us, no matter how difficult they may be, no matter how much it costs me to love them. That kind of love is impossible for us sinners. But not for God. The fruit of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts through the gospel, the fruit of faith, is that kind of love. My friends, you have that faith. Love God. Love each other. Amen.